

July 13, 2008

*Blessed are the Pure in Heart for they will see
God'*

In her collection of meditations 'Teaching a Stone to Talk', Annie Dillard likens church going to embarking on a cruise ship:

'On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? We should all be wearing crash helmets. Life preservers and signal flares should be issued; ushers should lash us to the pews, for the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence.'

Now this alb put on by those of us who presume to preach to whoever is prepared to listen is really, believe it or not, a sanitised version of a crash helmet. And lest you imagine that you are unclad, the white robes of your baptism that you are wearing, though invisible, are likewise crash helmets. We all need to recover something of this lost imagery to remind ourselves that in church we are always in dangerous territory.

At any rate, the texts we read Sunday by Sunday come from a world that can be retrieved only with great resolve, courage even. They come from a world where the question to be settled is that of who God is, not that of whether God is, which increasingly is the question of our times. In the world of our text, the question of what it means to be a human being can only be shaped if the prior question of who God is has been resolved satisfactorily. For us it is the other way round. Human existence and human need are the ultimate givens, so that for the world around us, whether God is to be found in all of this or not has become problematic; witness the enthusiastic reception given to the current atheistic glitterati's largely puerile theological fulminations. 'Borders' bookshop I saw the other day actually shelves Dawkins and Hitchens under 'Spirituality'. What a good place for them!

But to get to the point. I believe that some of you are following the different Beatitudes each week using Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'Cost of Discipleship'. If so you will have begun to appreciate why crash helmets are in order. Today, for example, he answers the question: 'Who are the pure in heart?' by proposing, what we might expect, that

it is 'only those whose hearts are undefiled by their own vices. But then he goes on to propose what is surely shocking — 'and undefiled by their own virtues too'. A heart undefiled by its virtues? Surely not. But yes, as he rightly says: 'the pure heart is pure alike of good and evil, it belongs exclusively to Christ...' There we have it. 'The pure heart is pure alike of evil – and good'.

Now we each will have our own explanations for why people no longer come to church, but I suggest that the main one is that we are all complicit in the belief that the chief end of religion is to make us good, even if most don't believe it. Secularists who enjoy writing to 'The Age', repudiate, of course, the very notion that goodness and religion are bedfellows. And just think of all those you know who, on discovering that you still come to church, offer the usually triumphant inverted pharisaical rejoinder: 'You don't need to go to Church to be good.' Goodness is undoubtedly claimed to be the highest virtue of all, regardless of how it is arrived at.

This is neither the time nor the place to appreciate how this has happened over the past 250 years — the dissolution of the truth that is always appropriate to human existence into moralism — but we need to be absolutely certain that this elevation of goodness is in clear violation of the biblical witness. Right at the beginning for example, the warning could not be more stark. The two trees in the garden — you may eat of the tree of life, but beware of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — do not eat it or you will die. Well we do and we have. Concerning evil, we can appreciate the warning, but the good? Surely we need to immerse ourselves in it, feast on it. Yet the gospel actually tells us that Jesus deflects the category when he is celebrated as the good: 'Why do you call me good?; there is none good but God'. Or our dilemma, voiced so passionately last week by Paul: 'The good that I would, I do not; the evil that I would not that I do. Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? So blessed indeed, are the pure in heart.

Here is a test. What comes into your mind when you hear the Christian injunction: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' What the Beatitude this morning has in mind, purity of heart — or the category of moral goodness? If you think I exaggerate about this less than subtle transposition of purity of heart into morality, consider the millions of the biblically ignorant who

have grown up from childhood over the last 150 years singing Cecil Frances Alexander's verses: 'He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven saved by his precious blood', followed by 'There was no other good enough...' It may be someone's favourite hymn, but it is a disaster on nearly every count. The attraction, I might say, of being a visiting preacher is that you can drop a brick and run!

And if you're still not convinced, even that most vitriolic scourge of religion more than a hundred years ago, Friedrich Nietzsche, understood that what is done out of love occurs 'beyond good and evil'. He saw the problem, even if he went for an answer in a different direction from our text. So: Blessed are not 'the good', but 'blessed are the pure in heart'.

The issue is clear, but yet all is not as simple as it may seem. More problems are before us. Why? Because for us the heart is the seat of emotion, how we feel about things. The fact is that in a world that reduces everything to 'how I feel', exhortations to be pure in heart will not do the trick, at least they will be less than Jesus has in mind.

For the phrase 'the pure in heart' comes straight out of the Old Testament. There the heart is understood to be the seat of thought and will, not emotion. So in reply to the psalmist's question: who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? — that is, to enter the temple for worship — the reply is given: 'Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false'. Nothing touchy, feely here. Or again, mindful of King David's moral treachery, his subsequent request as we have it in Psalm 51: 'Create in me a clean heart, and put a new and right spirit within me' has to do with that wholesale repentance to be exercised in every facet of life.

'The heart', then, is a person's innermost being, shaping one's entire life, usually unconsciously. Here again the blight of our age is self-consciousness. Everything is calculated to 'make a statement', whether that be of conformity or of a desire to shock. The meaning of salvation for our day then, if the quest is ever allowed to surface, will unequivocally mean the liberation from this secular demand of the flesh — this all-consuming law of self-consciousness. If and when that takes place, we might be on the way to grasping better what it means for the pure in heart to finally achieve its goal — a resolution for the first time of that greatest of all human quests — a vision of God. For to see God as God really is is what faith hopes for, and that for which life is given. That end comprehends everything that the tradition calls salvation, glory, life.

But the real point is that that salvation — promised for the future — has now become present in the One who is speaking. He is already giving expression to what is hoped for in that future. So it is that, here at the beginning of his ministry, in everything Jesus is and does, we already 'see God'.

Our time has gone, except to propose that each Beatitude in truth becomes the key to unlocking what is at stake in every lectionary. Today, Paul's contrast between flesh and spirit — that is, the constant struggle between the whole of life turned away from God or the whole of life turned towards God — is an obvious illustration of this Beatitude. But what of the Old Testament passage and what for us is surely problematic at the human level, in the election of Jacob at Esau's expense? Esau is undoubtedly the more attractive figure — generous, impulsive, quick to forgive. By contrast, Jacob is crafty and fearful. But the point of the narrative is to tell us that Jacob is singleminded in the search for the birthright and the blessing. Esau might come first in point of time, but Jacob, his twin, comes out holding on to his brother's heel. The point is that the struggle begun in the womb between the line of nature and the line of grace continues from the moment of birth. Singleminded Jacob is, and so of him the Beatitude, unlikely though it be from our point of view, holds good.

Surely this story demonstrates why we need to wear crash helmets in Church. In the world, we have to believe that the line of nature — and therefore human goodness — always deserves honour. In church on the other hand, we come to hear about a line of grace which can be guaranteed always to defy our conventions.

In other words: Beyond good and evil, 'blessed are the pure in heart', for the promise is certain: it is they who, even now, will 'see God'. May it be given to us to have such hearts.

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